A Single Decision (Take Two)

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Aboard Invisible Hand, on that fateful day above Coruscant, Grievous makes a choice that causes a few little changes for the Separatists and Republic alike. [rewrite of a much older story]
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Chapter 37

Grievous stormed about the bridge of *Invisible Hand.* "What do you mean, less than a thousand ships are ready!?" he bellowed to the hologram of Mar Tuuk.

"Most of the fleet is still fueling up, re-arming, and overhauling, sir," said the Nemoidian, as cool as ever. "We believed we had days left to finish preparations."

"Unacceptable! We need to move, *now!*"

Tuuk shook his head. "That is impossible, sir. The majority of the fleet will not be able to depart in full fighting condition for another twenty-four hours at least."

I should open fire on these slow louts, then we'll see how fast they can get battle-ready, Grievous thought. Instead, he reluctantly took the more pragmatic option. "I will depart with all available ships to Ciutric. You have twenty-four hours to get the rest of the fleet moving. Starting *now*." Tuuk's only answer was to nod, and his hologram vanished. "Dofine, set course for Ciutric!"

"Yes, General," said the Nemoidian captain.

Eight hundred and eighty three warships followed. It was the smallest fleet Grievous had led in months, since the botched attempt to acquire the giant kyber crystal on Utapau. *Could it be sabotage?* he wondered. Mar Tuuk had walked a very thin and shady line during the coup. He'd brought assets to the corporate side, only to betray them and hand them over to Grievous, alongside Nute Gunray. But with Hithlu's departure, Tuuk was now the most experienced flag officer in the fleet. This was going to be a test of loyalty at the most inopportune moment.

Grievous pushed the thoughts from his mind, and instead focused on the more immediate problem: he was going into battle with less than a tenth of his planned forces. He was going to need backup. As the fleet's hyperdrives spooled up, he sent out a priority communique to Blox Hatha aboard the battleship *Cataclysm,* estranged sister-ship to Grievous's beloved *Malevolence.* The portly Nemoidian cyborg answered promptly. *I'm surrounded by these things,* Grievous thought. A whole company of Nemoidian soldiers were even being hosted aboard *Invisible Hand*, in preparation for the Agamar drop.

"General! What can I do for you?" asked Hatha, saluting sharply.

"Captain Hatha, I need you in the Ciutric sector, immediately," Grievous said.

"But General, I just sent my crew on shore leave-"

"Leave's canceled, forever," said Grievous. "Get over here!"

"I'm firing up the engines right now, sir," Hatha said, looking glum.

One super-battleship ought to balance out against whatever the Republic is bringing, Grievous thought.

Encounter's organic crew slept for a long while, as Khan's loaned repair drones patched up as much of the mauled destroyer as they could. It was the deep sleep born of exhaustion, Esera's favorite kind of sleep; the only sleep that lasted her more than six hours, dreamless and dark. She only awoke up to a call from the bridge.

"Captain, Khan is requesting permission to board."

"Granted," groaned Esera, rubbing her eyes. "Tell him I'll meet him... eventually." She owed him her ship and the success of her operation, the least she could do was humor him. Even if he was only a droid. Esera groggily rose, showered, and dressed, before going off to find Khan. She found him and R8 in the ship's vault, counting Republic credit ingots.

"Quite the find, is it not?" asked Khan, red eyes almost seeming to wink beneath the helmet-like armor plates.

"Why are you here?" Esera asked. "I really don't want to deal with you the first thing in the morning."

"This is my ship, Captain," Khan said. "*Encounter* is assigned to my fleet, I merely let you borrow it. But your astromech droid and I have been determining *Encounter*'s value. I am prepared to hand over all necessary documentation to you in return for three million credits."

R8 beeped, and a datapad on the floor flashed. When Esera picked it up, she saw just how many credits she'd taken from Riberre's manor. "One hundred and fifty-nine million!?" she gasped.

"Spice running is the number one get-rich-quick scheme in the Galaxy," said Khan. "I funded my daughter's creation partially with selling off spice cargoes I took as war prizes."

Daughter, thought Esera, as her amazement at how rich she was vanished. *That's right, Khan's science project. And now he admits to drug running on the side.* Just what was up with this droid? Was that even legal under Confederacy laws? It sure wasn't legal in the Republic. "I'll talk to Voyan later about what to do with this money. Just... don't tell him you're selling spice. He's very touchy about that kind of thing."

"Acknowledged," said Khan. "I have awoken my daughter, and I would like for you and Lieutenant Voyan to meet her."

"I need to deal with a certain Zeltron assassin," Esera said. "And my cook. And my... Skakoan cyberguard." She wasn't sure what else to call Murshida. "But after all that, I'll come meet your science project."

"We will be expecting you, then," said Khan. He departed with a whirl of his new cloak. *I can't believe he listened to Voyan about that thing,* thought Esera, rolling her eyes. With the money counted and Khan off *her* ship, Esera made her way to the medbay, R8 in tow. Xiss was already awake, but she laid dejectedly in her bed, staring up at the ceiling.

"You got something to say, Komara?" asked the Zeltron girl.

"Riberre's dead. So is Mofuwa," Esera told her. "Your mission was accomplished."

"Great," said Xiss, without a spark of energy in her voice.

"My ship took heavy damage in battle, we're analyzing the extent now," said Esera. "You may return to Zeltros or stay aboard for the time being. The choice is yours."

"Who put you up to this?" Xiss asked, giving Esera a tired look.

"Ahsoka Tano." Esera wasn't going to waste her time lying to another Force-sensitive. "She helped me find Riberre and Voyan, and she asked I look out for you."

"Pathetic," sighed Xiss. "You actually listened to that brat."

Esera wasn't in the mood to play nice this early in the day, she answered snark with snark. "I'd say you'd understand one day, but Ventress might have knocked a brain cell out of your skull with the beating she gave you. That'd be a fifty percent loss, by my estimate."

"Even your insults are weak," Xiss said. "Come on, put some fire into it, you stuck-up-" The Zeltron girl proceeded to use a series of impolite words that called into question both Esera's chastity *and* ability to keep a faithful male partner. Maybe a normal woman might have been offended, but it was something so far out of Esera's experience–especially considering that this was coming from a Zeltron, a people whose culture valued neither chastity nor faithfulness–that she just made a confused face.

"Uh, okay..." Esera said. "I can see we have a long way to go. Try not to actually upset me, Alize might throw you out an airlock, and I wouldn't stop her."

"She'd have to catch me, first."

"Do you want to say that to her face?"

The Zeltron said nothing more, and looked away, scowling.

Esera's next stop among irksome traveling companions was Lieutenant Voyan's quarters, inconveniently located on the junior officer's deck, which was just far enough from the senior officer's deck that it was infuriating to have to travel between the two. Not that Esera often had business with Voyan outside of the bridge or mess hall, but *Encounter* did not come with an office set up.

"Lieutenant, do you have a moment?" she asked to the closed door, hands behind her back, hiding an item the droids had recovered from the manor house. The door slid open.

"Yes?" asked Voyan, standing up from his foam pad on the bare deck. The cabin was as sparse and desolate as ever. It reminded her of his speeder's interior, cleaned obsessively and devoid of personality, aside from the replica of Xim's flag on the wall. *Do normal men really live like this, or is it just him and the Jedi?* Esera wondered.

"I need you to assess our damage. There's no way we're getting back into fighting order without spacedock time, and I want to know if we can do it somewhere safe like Minntooine or if we need to stop somewhere riskier," she said.

"Oh, we're not making it to Minntooine," said Voyan. "I'd suggest putting in at the nearest friendly spacedock for emergency repairs, then continuing on to Minntooine. Or Sluis Van, if we want to insult the Hutts. Which I do."

"One war at a time, Voyan," Esera said. Something tugged at her mind. "Uh, your speeder is still down in Ibisa, you know."

Voyan sat up straight, like a spring had been planted beneath his back. "Permission to borrow the cargo shuttle, Captain?"

"Granted." Esera put forth her hands, and the item she'd brought, in front of her. "By the way, the droids found this yesterday morning. Didn't have the chance to give it back until now."

"My datapad," Voyan said. He took it from her a little too quickly, and Esera felt a sudden anxiety in him. "Thank you very much, Captain."

"I didn't read anything on it, if that's what you're wondering."

That earned her a suspicious look. "Your mind-reading only works one way, you know that, right?"

"Whatever deviant filth you've got on that thing, I don't *want* to know," said Esera.

"Yes, yes, the mysterious and exotic black dwarf stars," Voyan said, standing up and stretching. "Let us discover what forbidden secrets lie deep inside those balls of cold, degenerate matter." Esera put a hand over her face, trying not to laugh and trying not to sigh at the same time. For a moment, Voyan had managed to directly channel the straight-faced *is-he-joking-or-not* energy of Master Callo.

"This trip is going to cut into our repair schedule, Captain," Voyan went on. "But I'm not losing that speeder, not after all the time and money I've put into it."

"Would it help if you weren't the only trained engineer onboard?" asked Esera.

"Yes, it would, actually."

"Alright, then, we'll start recruiting an actual crew," she said. "But you'll have to move your... sleeping pad and flag into the first officer's cabin. We'll need these for the actual grunts."

"Very well," said Voyan. "I'll miss how this place is cozy, though..."

"Lieutenant, there's nothing cozy about a metal box and a foam pad."

Voyan just shook his head. "Respectfully, Captain, you just don't get it."

No, Esera did not get it at all.

After a sketchy hyperspace flight, *Vigilance* arrived at Commenor, a major trade hub and now the staging ground for Republic operations headed towards the southern end of the Confederacy's core sectors. Not that any operations were possible right now. Obi-wan read that the orbital facilities had been hit by the Separatist battleship *Cataclysm* three weeks ago, and the damage showed.

"This is the end of the line for us, until we can get refueled, sir," said a non-clone officer to Commander Cody. "Our last reserves will be needed to stay in orbit for the near future."

"Very good, lieutenant," Cody said, nodding. He turned to Obi-wan next. "General, your command has yet to be reinstated, and I lack authorization to do it myself. Therefore, you will have our full communications suite at your disposal should you need to contact the Jedi Council."

"Thank you, Commander," said Obi-wan. "I'll take you up on that offer."

Encounter's ramming attack had rocked *Vigilance*, which still had the destroyer's prow embedded in what was left of the ventral hangar and fuel tanks. Fires and secondary explosions had further ravaged the star destroyer. The lists of missing crew still numbered in the hundreds, they were likely nothing but charred corpses in areas still too hot to enter. Obi-wan's former flagship wasn't going anywhere, anytime soon. They'd moved Ventress and her bacta tank to a hospital on the surface, where her shattered rib cage would be rebuilt.

Obi-wan reported back all the details of the Zeltros mission to the Council. Naturally, they were very interested to hear about Chancellor Tarkin summarily relieving him of command, and yet another encounter with Komara, the so-called Dark Jedi.

"Unsettling, the behavior of Tarkin is," said Yoda, hand on chin. "But unexpected, not."

"We all know Tarkin's going to be trouble," Mace Windu said. "I'm more interested in Master Kenobi's claim that Komara is *not* a Dark Jedi."

"This is completely contrary to two reports from our young knight, Aspar," Ki-Adi Mundi said, looking to the other masters. "Someone's lying here, or a seventeen year old girl is fooling us all."

"I find the latter unlikely," Shaak Ti said. She'd been glum ever since their conversation on the steps of the Temple the other week. Obi-wan didn't know the whole story of what'd happened after he left, but he did know Yoda and Mace Windu had talked to her, and encouraged her to go on meditative leave. That she was here in the Council meeting meant she hadn't actually been forced into it. Yet. "Either Aspar lied, or Obi-wan is lying. We've all known Master Obi-wan for years, if he were lying, we'd know, wouldn't we? Ardabur Aspar is a young knight who's never come under our serious attention before. There's a weak point in this narrative, and he's it."

Mace Windu didn't look happy to hear that, but he nodded. "I'm afraid Shaak Ti is right. We're going to need to reassess Aspar's reports."

"Return to the Komara investigation you will, Obi-wan," Yoda said. "Track her path, we must."

"I had a few good leads before this Zeltros business started." Obi-wan stroked his beard. "The problem is, the best one is on Agamar. And we've all heard about what's happening there." The droid general Kalani had seized control of the planet, and was drafting the Agamarians by the millions to supplement his droid legions, employing all kinds of cruel and horrific weapons against Loyalist armies. Agamar was turning into one of the bloodiest and longest-running battles of the war, spanning nearly an entire year so far.

"Then go to Agamar you shall," Yoda said.

"Of course, Master Yoda." Obi-wan bowed, and hoped the rumors of weaponized toxic gas he'd heard were greatly exaggerated.

Denn Wessex was a man that Tarkin was proud to call one of his regional governors. Unlike many in the Republic's high command, he had recognized early on just how catastrophic a breach in supply would be for their forces in the Outer Rim. He'd built up a stockpile of fuel for the last half-year, and his fleet retained *regional* mobility enough to counter any Separatist attack. Such as the one that was now imminent.

"Our spy drones detected roughly a thousand Separatist ships leaving their main fleet," Wessex told Tarkin via viewscreen. The blue light of the hyperspace tunnel cast his face in an eerie glow. "It seems my departure did not go unnoticed. Unfortunately I cannot guarantee I will arrive at Ciutric before Grievous."

"Unfortunate indeed, Governor," said Tarkin.

"But," continued Wessex, "if you can get me reinforcements, I may be able to cripple this offensive as it begins, Chancellor."

"How so?"

"Grievous has taken a tenth of his fleet to intercept me at Ciutric. I've taken only my fastest ships, just a few hundred *Venator* cruisers and modified *Acclamator* assault ships. We'll have firepower parity with him, and an edge in mobility." Wessex brought up a map of the hyperlanes between Ciutric and Axxila, superimposed over the screen. "Chancellor, if I can get my main fleet and some assistance to Vinsoth, I can split the Separatists in two. I'll give Grievous a bloody nose at Ciutric, at the very least, and then join the main force at Vinsoth to take on the rest of them. Defeat in detail."

Tarkin nodded. "A fine plan, Governor. I'll get everything I can to you."

In truth, Tarkin wasn't sure just how much help he could spare Wessex. The Core worlds were still scared stiff by the deep-striking raiders of the rebels, they were refusing to deploy their home fleets to the front. And even if they did deploy said fleets, there was the problem of the Republic's gutted depots and depleted shipping throughout the Galactic north and east. As efficient as the industrial giants could be, when sufficiently prodded, Tarkin's orders for new transports and escorts had not yet produced anything. *Has it really only been a few days?* he wondered. Time seemed to both fly and crawl, lately. *The sooner I sort out this supply issue, the sooner I can get to the Ultimate Weapon,* he told himself. *That* would be what would end the war... provided he could get a weapon for it. That was the subject of his next meeting.

"My lord," a voice said on the intercom, "Lieutenant Commander Krennic is here to see you."

"Send him in," Tarkin said.

Orson Krennic was a man a decade or more younger than Tarkin, and from about as lowly a background as there could be, but he was no doubt just as ambitious. They'd had their run-ins, in the past, and as much as Tarkin would have liked to ditch the troublesome plebeian, he was most familiar with the Ultimate Weapon. "Chancellor," said Krennic, bowing just low enough to be respectable.

"Lieutenant Commander," said Tarkin, pointedly not inviting him to sit. "I hear you had some troubles with the Geonosians a few months ago. I trust they did not set back your schedule too far?"

"A trifling matter," Krennic said, his jaw tightly set. "The station's frame is intact. At our current rate of supply and availability of labor, we are set to complete the station in just over eighteen years."

"If supply and labor were to increase favorably, how fast would you be able to finish this station?" asked Tarkin.

"The only limiting factor is physical space, Chancellor," said Krennic. "Every ton of metal used for those star destroyers Palpatine wanted could be going to my station, and the Republic would never need another star destroyer again once it was finished."

"*Your* station?"

"The Republic's station." Krennic looked away, annoyed. "With unlimited supply, funding, and manpower, I could have an operational reactor and shell ready in under twelve months. I could have a battle-ready station ready in eighteen, defensively speaking."

"And what does that mean?"

"The primary weapon will not be ready for some time longer," said Krennic. "There are... issues, with weaponizing a system at the size the plans call for. As may you know, Chancellor, surface area grows by a power of two, and volume grows by a power of three... I've got Doctor Erso working day and night on it, but he's delivered nothing conclusive. And there's also the issue of finding kyber crystals large enough for this weapon system."

"Are there alternatives to this super-laser?" Tarkin asked, folding his hands and putting on his most unimpressed face. That question got a scowl from Krennic.

"Chancellor, without the super-laser, the entire point of the Ultimate Weapon is lost," he said.

"A lack of ingenuity is all too common to the lower classes, it seems," sighed Tarkin, furtively enjoying the incredulity on the engineer's face. "I will increase your resources, Lieutenant Commander, but until you deliver a working super-laser or an equally destructive weapon is found, the station will remain of secondary priority."

"Yes, Chancellor. Thank you, Chancellor." His words were as forced as his parting bow.

Foolish oaf, thought Tarkin. Perhaps it was unwise to antagonize key persons to the war effort, but Krennic would eventually be replaceable. His relationship to the scientists working on the super-laser was all that kept him in his position. If an alternative was found... *Well, one thing at a time.*

With that finished, Tarkin turned his attention to arranging the scrounging up a few more ships for Moff Wessex. He was going to need to threaten a few senators and planetary governments, and after dealing with Krennic, that was exactly what Tarkin was in the mood for.

Grievous's fleet arrived at Ciutric only minutes before the Republic did. The Loyalists numbered half of the Confederate force, but hulls mattered not when such a disparity in durability and firepower existed. Initial scanning revealed only two kinds of ships: *Venators,* and *Acclamators*, with their hangars excised and armaments greatly improved. "Wessex is no fool," Grievous said to no one in particular, aboard *Invisible Hand*'s bridge.

"No, sir," said Captain Dofine. "Our battleships and frigates will slow us down in maneuvers. The Republic has the initiative, they'll dictate the flow of the battle."

"Perhaps," Grievous said. "We must hold Ciutric's orbit. Maintain formation, keep our bow pointed at the enemy." *Our greatest advantage is our forward firepower,* thought Grievous. *But if they get in among us, we're finished...*

Wessex wasted no time in attempting just that. He deployed his fighters and bombers first, met by swarms of Vulture droids and Tri-fighters. They tore into each other in a bloody melee. With the light craft engaged, the star destroyers began a long sweep in a conical formation, each ship covering another's ventral blind spots.

"They're well-drilled," Dofine remarked, watching the hologram of the tactical situation. "I don't think we'd hold a formation like that."

Grievous didn't bother answering. He sent out orders directly to the fleet through his wireless connection: the frigates and destroyers were to concentrate their heavy batteries on the lead ships of the Loyalist cone, in order to disrupt the careful formation and open up gaps in their fire arcs. Meanwhile the battleships would serve as anchors for the Separatist formations, and position themselves to provide mutual cover, much the same as the Republic was doing. Wessex was making a spear, and Grievous was making a net to catch it.

The massed Separatist fire overloaded the lead star destroyers' shields in moments, and soon enough their armor was being melted into slag by the immensity of the turbolaser fire bearing down on them. But the Republic hit back, a dozen frigates and a number of destroyers had already been blown to smithereens. The great cone plowed through Grievous's net, the flanks of the formation lacking the ability to concentrate on single targets to such a great effect as before. But so were Grievous's ships blocked from focusing the whole fleet's firepower in one area. The battleships and their constellations of escorts pounded away at the Loyalist ships, which gave as good as they got.

Then, Wessex pulled a maneuver that astounded even Grievous. The lead squadron in the cone flipped around, and began to accelerate back the way they had come. The rest of the cone followed, and in moments the entire formation had reversed itself. Grievous was reminded of a school of fish he'd seen on some planet's aquarium, attending a public event with Dooku. *Well done, Wessex, well done,* thought Grievous, as *Invisible Hand* was rocked by a stray turbolaser barrage. The Loyalists shot away from the Confederate fleet, to regroup beyond firing range.

"Have all captains conduct damage reports," Grievous ordered, though his mind was already somewhere else. *They breached the net,* he thought, *but they turned around, instead of continuing onto the planet or dispersing among us. Why? Maybe they want us facing away from the planet, which means...* "Recall the fighters," said Grievous.

"Yes, sir," Dofine said. "Just ours?"

"The entire fleet's. The Republic is going to attack us from the planet."

On the tactical holomap, Grievous watched tens of thousands of Vulture droids and tri-fighters disengage from the enemy's fighters, and zip back to their motherships. A minute later, sensors detected a Loyalist fighter and bomber strike force soaring up from Ciutric IV's surface. Now Grievous was in a true dilemma. Did he keep his fighter screen close to the fleet to defend against both enemy groups? Or did he gamble everything on destroying the force behind him before the force in front of him could engage? The droid network calculated that it could not guarantee total defense of the fleet if both groups were to join.

"Deploy our fighters against the group coming from the planet," Grievous said. "All ships are to divert full power to forward shields and weapons."

In the minutes of waiting for the two attacks to hit home, Grievous thought on what goal Wessex had in mind. The Republic controlled Ciutric's surface, or at least, the cities. The local army had dispersed into the civilian population, maintaining caches of weapons and vehicles. If the Republic had gotten wind of his plan to use that force against the massive Loyalist armies on Agamar, it made sense that they'd want to either reinforce their own garrison or just simply obliterate the surface.

But they hadn't, despite Wessex's fleet having a clear shot at the planet. No, they were focused on attacking the Separatist fleet itself. That made sense, too. No army moved without a fleet to move it. If Wessex could destroy Grievous's fleet here, that would be a significant portion of ships deployed for the offensive taken out of play before it even began. The Republic only had a few hundred star destroyers, though. They would never be able to destroy Grievous's fleet, not without taking terrible losses themselves.

He's stalling, Grievous deduced. *Wessex is going to keep me tied up here as long as he can, he knows that I can't leave or I leave the planet open to him, but neither can I swiftly destroy him. What is he buying time for?* There was one man who might know. Grievous opened a channel to the cruiser *Further Beyond*.

"Rear Admiral Dura," Grievous said to the hologram of a Troxan woman. Like most Troxans, Dura's rotund, fish-like appearance made her look harmless and stupid. Dura had proven anything but, as one of the successful divisional commanders operating in the grey areas between the Confederacy and Hutt Space.

"General Grievous," Dura answered, the oily dampness of her hairless head apparent even through hologram. "Is there a problem?"

"I must contact one of my agents. You have command of the fleet. I am *ordering* you to interrupt me if *anything* goes wrong. Is that understood?" asked Grievous. While his reputation terrified his subordinates, which was something he enjoyed, he had realized that too often no one informed him of dire problems until it was far too late to do anything about them, simply out of fear of his wrath. Therefore, he had to make himself explicit in what he wanted.

"Understood, General. Dura out."

Dura's bulbous blob of a nose and blank black eyes may have been an offensive sight, but Grievous found her no-nonsense attitude refreshing. That the Troxan homeworld was under a bloody Republic occupation served as excellent motivation, as well. With control of the fleet in competent hands, Grievous rushed to the secure communication chamber on *Invisible Hand.*

Clothar Aclinde, the spymaster who hated being called a spymaster, must have expected Grievous to call on him. He answered after only a few seconds delay. "Good day, General," said Aclinde. "How may I serve?"

"I need to know everything happening behind Loyalist lines," Grievous said. "And I need to know right now."

"Moff Wessex has mobilized his entire oversector fleet for battle, and given the volume of communications between Paarin Minor and the Core has increased by several orders of magnitude, I believe it likely that help is on the way for him," said Aclinde, turning to face a monitor outside of the holoprojector's range. "Our spy satellites in key Core systems have transmitted their data, but we have not finished our analysis yet. That being said, we have not detected any major movements... for now."

"Stop your analysis. Focus only on systems whose fuel supplies we know are intact," said Grievous. Aclinde nodded, and spoke to someone not in projection range, and then turned to Grievous again. "Eliminate all systems whose warships do not have elevated radiation levels. Show me the results."

"Yes, General. Beaming over data now," Aclinde said.

Grievous took a few seconds to look over the list. There were dozens of systems, anything could have been happening. But among them all, one system alone stood out: a Kuati star dreadnought's reactors had quadrupled their radiation output.

Voyan's unceremonious return to Zeltros kept him off the ship for the better part of the day, but he made it back just in time to eat and then go see Khan's creation. For the first time since their arrival in the system, the whole complement of living beings upon *Encounter* gathered in the mess hall, minus one Nimbus Commando. Voyan and Esera sat at the same table, with chairs for Alize and Murshida ready, but Xiss had chosen to sit by herself.

"Did I miss anything?" Murshida asked, as he entered.

"Not really," said Esera.

"*Those* two only wrecked my kitchen. I spent more time putting it back together than I did cooking today," Alize grumbled, glaring at Esera and Voyan. The big Zygerrian brought out an equally big pot, filled with a steaming hot meat stew. The spices made Esera's nose tingle. As usual, Murshida got his vegetable drink, but refrained from immediately using his noisy pressure chamber and straw hybrid.

"Ramming the enemy was the Captain's idea," Voyan said. "I had nothing to do with it."

"We rammed them?" Xiss asked, suddenly much more interested in the conversation.

"Yes, and we left most of our bow stuck inside that star destroyer," said Voyan. "If you see any locked hatches, don't go through them. A lot of the ship lost pressurization when one of those beam lasers hit us with our shields down. Again, the Captain's fault."

"Your confidence in me is noted, lieutenant," Esera said.

"Wait, we *fought* a star destroyer, in *this* piece of junk?" Xiss was incredulous. But before anyone said anything, Alize stood up, and dragged the Zeltron and her chair to their table, with one hand.

"If you're going to talk to us, you're going to sit with us," said Alize. "Those were the rules in my house and they're the rules in my mess hall." The red skin of the Zeltron girl made any blush invisible on her face, but Esera could feel it in the Force. She tried not to smirk. Voyan spent much of the meal explaining the battle in detail, giving additional engineer's insights that Esera felt were, quite frankly, unneeded. But Xiss nodded along, seemingly genuinely interested in how *Encounter* had managed to barely best *Vigilance*.

Is she really interested, though? wondered Esera. *This girl's handler is dead, her target is dead, she's at the mercy of a woman she hates, stuck on a ship full of people she doesn't know in the slightest and most likely doesn't trust. Maybe she's trying to get on our good sides...* Or maybe, Xiss was just trying to keep her mind busy rather than face the terrifying uncertainty and utter loneliness of her situation. That was too painfully familiar for Esera, she preferred the first theory.

After dinner, Esera pulled Murshida aside. "This girl's trouble," she told him. "Not Ventress levels of trouble, but if you could handle Ventress, you can handle Xiss. If she tries anything, *anything* at all... put her down."

"Captain, I did not handle Ventress," said Murshida. "I had the help of the Zeltron and the Jabiimi, and I incapacitated myself merely wounding Ventress. I may be awake and walking again, but I am not yet in condition to fight again."

"Can you keep an eye on her, at least?"

"Of course."

With Xiss under surveillance, Esera and Voyan departed for Khan's supply ship, and flying laboratory. They landed *Whirlwind* in a well-stocked hangar, devoid of any life. The eerie silence of Separatist vessels was something that still bugged Esera, after three years of hustle and bustle in the Republic Navy. The super tactical droid had been awaiting them.

"Welcome back, Captain Komara and Lieutenant Voyan," said Khan. "It has been some time, has it not?"

"About a month, since we were last here," said Esera. "I'm surprised you've got your experiment up and running so quickly."

"Physical performance was simple. Everything else will take some time," said Khan. He took them to the laboratory, where his creation was out of her tank. She laid naked on a metal table, wires inserted under her unblemished skin at multiple points. The bio-droid still appeared hairless, but for the eyelashes, though Esera assumed the tiny, nigh-invisible hairs that covered all Humans were there too. Esera almost jumped when she noticed the bio-droid's eyes were open, and following her movement. They were a pale blue, nearly white. "Behold," Khan said, "Alpha."

"That's really creative, Khan," Esera said. She looked over to the three polarized tanks. "Let me guess, that's Beta, Delta, and Gamma over there?"

"How astute," said the droid.

"She's got interesting eyes," Voyan remarked.

"They are unfinished. Her irises lack pigmentation, what you see is the light wavelength the tissue reflects most," Khan told him. "She will choose the final pigmentation when she is ready."

"Is she... aware of us?" asked Voyan, waving a hand over the bio-droid's face. The eyes followed it.

"She is recording this, and will remember it," Khan said. "But she is not yet understanding of what she is seeing, let alone what we are saying."

"Hold on," Esera said. "Back when we first saw her skeleton in the tank, before Zygerria, you said her neural network was already learning. But she can't speak?"

"No." Khan picked up a bright pink rubber ball from a table, a curiously out-of-place object in a science lab. Without warning, he threw it at Voyan, who raised his hands and caught it. "Why did you do that?"

"Do what?" asked Voyan, looking at the ball in confusion.

"You caught the object I threw at you."

"It would have hit me," said Voyan.

"You had no time to consciously react to the object," Khan said. "Yet you did. Consider how many other similar actions you perform on a daily basis. Why do you smile when you are happy? How do you keep your balance as you walk? What makes your skin tingle when you are uncomfortable? There is a vast foundational layer of instinctual reactions your conscious lives are built upon, most of which you have no control over and little to no awareness of. It is taking time to impart this onto my child."

Esera opened herself to the Force, and focused on Alpha the bio-droid. She felt the chemical reactor at work inside her body, pulsing with heat and energy, the lungs pumping lubricating fluid throughout her frame, the mono-molecular wires sending electrical signals to artificial muscles and synthetic synapses. Alpha was a near-perfect mimicry of life, but Esera felt no spirit within her, no sign of a deeper connection to the Force than the raw material. And that came as a relief to Esera. *I don't know what I would have done if this droid had actually made new life,* she thought. *Machines making people... what would the Galaxy have been coming to?*

"Well, this is all *very* fascinating," said Esera, "thank you for having us over to meet Alpha. I've got a ship to return to."

"We're leaving?" Voyan asked, frozen in the middle of waving the rubber ball over Alpha's eyes.

"You have my permission to depart," Khan said. "I desired for Alpha to see you with her own eyes early in her life. That is all."

With no further pleasantries to be exchanged, Esera pulled Voyan away. He threw the ball to Khan, whose arm snapped out of his enveloping cloak to catch it. They left the droid standing like a pillar of darkness in the brightly-lit lab.

"I'm impressed, Captain," Voyan said to her back aboard the *Encounter.* "It's incredible what Khan's done with a pirate's resources."

"And illegal, in civilized space," said Esera. "That thing is dangerously close to being alive. She's not *actually* alive, I didn't feel it in the Force, but... she's too close for comfort. Droids should be droids."

That wasn't the response Voyan had been hoping for, though it didn't show on his face. He quickly changed the subject. "I've made a list of planets with a spacedock open, that are in our range."

"Oh?"

"It's a short list, there's only one planet. And you're not going to like it."

"Lay it on me, lieutenant."

"Caramm V."

Esera sighed. "No, I don't like it at all." She opened a line to OOM-451 on her commlink. "Commander, prepare to set course for the Caramm system."

"A *Mandator-II* Star Dreadnought," Admiral Tuuk said, looking thoughtful as his hologram flickered. *Invisible Hand* shook again as Wessex's fleet made another attack, the fourth straight hour of battle. It was the only sign of what was happening beyond the communications room. "Now that is a problem, General. We have nothing to counter it."

"We have *Cataclysm* on the way," Grievous said.

"Hardly enough, sir, we need heavier weaponry." The Nemoidian scratched his chin. "Many of our officers fought pirates in the Outer Rim for decades. Yet more of our officers *were* pirates in the Outer Rim for decades. I will consult my subordinates, we'll get an idea to you shortly."

"See to it," said Grievous, shutting down the line. He mentally checked all his received reports, from the various battlefronts across the Galaxy. One was from his least-disappointing agent. Esera Komara had taken her *Recusant* light destroyer into battle with a *Venator* heavy cruiser. Skimming through the after-action report, Grievous was amused that she'd had the audacity to take on such a powerful foe, and satisfied she'd managed to give as good as she got. She was turning out to be a resourceful young woman, and had a creative bent that Grievous had valued highly in his warriors back on Kalee. Seeing that the battle was going as good as it could be under the command of Rear Admiral Dura, Grievous decided he'd congratulate her himself.

Komara did not take long to answer. "Grievous," she said, looking tired.

"Komara," Grievous said back. "You have done well at Zeltros. Humiliating Kenobi is an additional bonus to put you in my good graces."

"I can't say he didn't have it coming," said Esera.

"The Negotiator sent running, by an apostate Jedi and her old starship!" Grievous chuckled, and Komara winced at his choice of words.

"I'm not an apostate," she said. "Not at all. I'm not like Dooku or Krell."

"No matter," said Grievous. "Tell me of your battle with the star destroyer."

The apostate Jedi obliged. She explained the engagement, how it started with a chase and came down to a close-quarters brawl, ending with her improvised ramming attack, running the gauntlet of the dreaded SPHA-T. That was a weapon Grievous had respect for. "How did you avoid it?" he asked.

"I didn't," said Esera. "The laser went straight into the bow, luckily it missed anything vital."

The wheels in Grievous's head suddenly began to spin. "Irresponsible," he growled. "How deep did the laser penetrate?"

"Almost six hundred meters," Komara said. "It came in below the prow, and shot through at a slightly upward angle, hitting the lower edges of the inhabitable decks before dissipating against the reactor shielding bulkheads. If they hadn't hit us along our longitudinal axis, we'd have been skewered."

"That'd have been better if it had, at least the beam wouldn't have damaged as much as it did," Grievous told her. "You were supremely lucky, Komara, that that beam missed the fuel tanks and went through enough of your ship that it was too weak to penetrate the reactor bulkheads. Do not rely on luck."

"Understood," she said. "It was that, or fail the mission, though."

"Excuses. Do better next time." Grievous didn't give her time to respond. "You know how these SPHA-T weapons work, yes?"

"Vaguely," said Komara. "Why?"

"Because we defeated an entire fleet of these ships at Kashyyyk," Grievous told her. "Their wreckage is still scattered across the system. And I need a weapon with six hundred meters of penetrating power."

When General Grievous needed something done the right way, Kronaak was proud to be one of the officers Grievous called upon. *Search through an entire fleet's worth of wreckage and salvage, find every repairable SPHA-T emitter you can and get them to Axxila within twenty hours,* thought Kronaak, repeating the General's words. Searching an entire star system's worth of wreckage was not going to be a simple task. Luckily, the salvage teams that had been working the Kashyyyk system for weeks had done most of the job already.

"Yeah, those big laser guns," said a Harch contractor, via hologram, "we've got a few dozen intact ones stowed away, somewhere. The salvage droids bring one in every day."

"Very good," said Kronaak. "Please arrange to have them all aboard my ship within the hour."

"An hour-?" sputtered the Harch.

"War waits on no man," Kronaak told the contractor.

"I'll get my droids on it right away, then."

While the contractor, his employees, and his droids began the arduous process of moving thirty-eight SHPA-T guns from the bulk hauler they were being kept in to *Aethra,* Kronaak contracted his superior. "Admiral Tuuk, I've located the weapons," he reported.

"Very good," the Nemoidian's hologram answered. "My engineers are designing something now with the materials you claimed in your ship's cargo manifest. You will have your droids begin construction as soon as possible."

"Yes, sir," said Kronaak. "Twenty hours doesn't seem enough to build a weapon system, though."

"No, but it's all we've got."

Kronaak wondered at just what Grievous was going to do with the SPHA-Ts. As starship weapons, they were far from ideal. They traded immense firepower for immense energy consumption. This wasn't a problem on the ground, where larger, more permanent and sustainable reactor systems could be built to charge the guns, but on a starship with limited stocks of reactant, the power drain could prove catastrophic. The weapons had a habit of burning themselves out when fired at too high a power level, as well. There was a reason the Republic had slowly been phasing the SPHA-T out on the ground, in favor of less powerful, more reliable and practical systems. And in space, the SPHA-T's weapon simply didn't offer the efficiency or scalability of more traditional turbolaser systems. Kronaak had read the analyses of the device; in his opinion, the root of the problem lay with the focusing crystal the laser beam passed through. The larger the weapon, the larger the crystal needed, and there were stories of such things from the ancient galaxy, when the Old Republic and Sith Empire battled. Most experts agreed that crystals of that size didn't exist anymore. The Republic's weapon was as big as that type was going to get, and even then, finding such crystals fit for even *those* guns had to be difficult.

Better to stick with the simple turbolaser, thought Kronaak, watching the first lighters transfer their guns to *Aethra*. After unloading the cargo in record time, the battleship was on her way back to the front lines.

Many hours after he'd first engaged the enemy, Moff Wessex reported back to Tarkin.

"Chancellor, my plan worked perfectly," he said, looking weary but far from defeated. "Grievous held the planet's orbit but he lost time he could ill-afford. My main fleet is ready to intercept the Separatists at Vinsoth, but I must repeat my request for reinforcements. We will be outnumbered even more than usual and my best crews will have no time to rest between engagements."

"Well done, governor," Tarkin told him, as he sipped his evening tea. "You will be glad to hear I did find a reinforcement for you."

"A... reinforcement?" Wessex's brow scrunched up. "A singular reinforcement, my lord?"

Tarkin allowed himself a slight smile. "The *Incomparable* is heading your way, courtesy of our Kuati friends."

Wessex blinked once, and his mouth opened, then closed. "My lord, did you say the *Incomparable?*"

"I did, governor. The *Mandator II*-class star dreadnought *Incomparable* will be arriving at Vinsoth in just under twenty-six hours."

The man brightened at once, as vigor flowed into him once more. "The day will surely be ours, my lord. The rebels have nothing that can match *Incomparable*'s firepower, not even that blasted pirate ship of theirs!"

"I should hope so, governor, Kuat's assistance did not come cheap." Tarkin terminated the transmission.

"No, it did not," said the Kuati senator, breaking his silence from outside the projector's range. He was still fuming. "You have a lot of nerve, Chancellor."

"I would say the same of you, Senator," Tarkin told him. "Withholding vital assets to the war effort is tantamount to treason. I don't care how many of our ships come from Kuat, you are a part of the Republic and you will serve it when needed. If that is no longer suitable to you, I have no qualms over issuing a writ of attainder for your entire star system." The Kuati balked at those words. No chancellor had done such a thing since the Sith wars. "Don't give me that look, Senator. I can, and I will. Never deny my requests ever again. Is that understood?"

"Yes, Chancellor," said the Kuati, head bowed.

"Good. Now get out."

Author's note: Hope you had a good set of non-religiously specific holidays my fellow inoffensively gender neutral persons. For once I don't have much to say, I think this chapter speaks for itself. A lot of groundwork for pretty much the rest of the story here, as well as the next chapter (it should be obvious what's going to happen). And we get to see Khan's creation again, who now has something of a name. And yes, this is the first Kronaak POV since the Striking Star arc. I think. Turns out I don't have much use for his character if I don't need to cover military engagements or technological concepts. Once again, shout-out to my boy corshy for beta reading my sleep-deprivation fueled mess of a draft.

Name:

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